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THE ROUND TABLE

CO-OPERATION IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH COMPOSITION

As an answer to several inquiries in regard to our new plan for securing co-operation between different departments of instruction in the teaching of English composition, this brief explanation has been prepared.

About a year and a half ago, our English faculty became concerned and somewhat resentful over the almost universal but wholly indiscriminate criticism of the results obtained from the study of English composition in the high school. We knew that we had worked, as do most English teachers, too hard for our own personal welfare, and yet we were continually as good as told, by schoolmen and laymen alike, that our efforts had amounted to nothing, or less than nothing, so far as any practical gain to the students was concerned. Our graduates, along with those from most other high schools, could not spell, could not write a decently correct business letter, did not even in the ordinary discourse of their daily lives when free from the immediate supervision of the teacher of that subject speak grammatical English, and for everything connected with this deplorable state of affairs, teachers of English were held strictly to account.

On our part we were willing to acknowledge the truth of most, or even all, of the accusations. They were too glaringly manifest to be denied. But we would not believe that with justice to ourselves we should be made to accept all the blame. We continued to feel that if both sides of the question had been examined with equal care, much proof of many hindrances in our work would have been discovered, all tending toward our exoneration, at least in our own particular case.

When many of the children in a school come from homes where ignorant or foreign-born parents struggle with the grammar and vocabulary of a comparatively unfamiliar language, picking up, because it is the easiest way, the expressions of the uneducated people who are their fellow-laborers and neighbors, knowing little and caring less that the forms of speech they thus acquire are not good English, and their children hear this kind of language for many hours a day at home, the short period spent at school can do little to counteract such an influence. As an additional obstacle we also realized that, while doing their daily

work in other departments of the high school, the pupils were not held, to any appreciable extent, responsible for the kind of English they used. In other words, after having left the English recitation they relapsed almost immediately into their regular habits of incorrect speaking and writing, and, in the face of all this, the forty minutes a day spent under the care of the teacher of English was a mere drop in the bucket.

We were of course powerless to correct the home influence, but after many unsuccessful attempts to strengthen the results of our own forty minutes by devices to be used only within our own classrooms, we finally set to work to prolong if possible our influence throughout at least the whole of the school day. A list of directions, embodying what we regarded as fundamental requirements of good English, and such as could reasonably be required of even the Freshmen, was drawn up. At the next meeting of the teachers, these direction sheets were distributed, and the teachers of all other departments were requested to enforce them during every recitation. Since at that time the whole idea was as yet a mere experiment, and all we could do was to make a beginning somewhere, the first direction sheet was considered as applying to all pupils alike, no matter how little or how much English they were known to have taken, and it laid stress on little besides the two following requirements:

1. Grammatical mistakes either in speech or in writing were always to be corrected.
2. The use of incomplete sentences on the part of the pupils was to be permitted during only a certain proportion, about one third, of the recitation period.

Since then, because our experiment has proved successful in more respects than we dared to hope when we began, direction sheets, a different one for each grade of English work, are issued at the beginning of each school month. They are distributed to every teacher and embody such directions as sum up the chief points in English for which, with justice to himself and what he has been studying, the pupil can be held responsible at that time, our idea being to oblige him to practice, in other places and under different circumstances, what he has been learning during that particular month from us. The following is such a direction sheet recently issued for January, for use in all Freshman classes:

The following requirements shall be in force in all departments for pupils of grade 1b; and shall become the basis for the English grade given in other departments during January.

ORAL

1. Not more than 25 per cent of the recitations shall be in incomplete sentences. These recitations may be given while the pupil is seated.
2. If the recitation gives promise of continuing for several sentences the pupil shall rise and stand erect and free.
3. If the recitation is of the nature of a report, or lengthens to a paragraph, the pupil shall stand in front of the room before the class.
4. Sentences shall not be introduced with such words as "why," "well," "ah," etc.
5. The careful enunciation of syllables, particularly of final syllables, shall be insisted upon.

WRITTEN

1. Sentences shall begin with capitals.
2. Sentences shall close with a period.
3. Dependent clauses standing first shall be followed by commas.
4. Paragraphs shall be indented.
5. Balanced margins shall be maintained both at top, bottom, and sides of the page on which the written composition is placed.

The grades for English work in all other departments are kept separate and distinct from those given in the subject regularly taught by the department, and these grades, sent in each month by all these teachers, averaged together, form 25 per cent of the composition grade given by the English department at the close of the semester.

One of the good results has been that, just as we hoped, the average pupil is much more careful about the kind of English he uses in other places besides the English recitation room. He watches himself more closely and does not allow himself to relax quite so easily.

As to the extra work which such a method might be supposed to entail upon teachers in other departments, we can only say that if our teachers have had complaints they have not, up to the present time at least, let them be known. In every case we have found them ready and willing to co-operate with us in the matter, and so far as we have been able to learn, this extra oversight on their part has not increased their work to an appreciable extent, since we do not ask them to re-read any papers, but only to be as watchful as possible while carrying on their written work. Indeed, we are glad to find that they seem almost as much interested in the results as are we ourselves, while to their unflinching painstaking, much of the success of the plan must be attributed.

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